

Servant Leadership as a Burnout Mitigation Strategy in Agile IT Teams

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Abstract

The issue of burnout in the Information Technology (IT) sector has garnered significant attention due to its widespread effects on employees' health, productivity, and overall quality of life. This issue is further intensified by the adoption of agile methodologies and the growing demands of startup culture. These environments prioritize rapid development cycles and continuous delivery, often resulting in mismanagement of release planning, unplanned resource allocation, and heightened stress levels. In this context, the present study seeks to explore the potential of Servant Leadership (SL) as a mitigating strategy for burnout in agile IT teams. Drawing on extensive literature, SL is highlighted for its focus on employee well-being, empowerment, and fostering a supportive organizational culture. By examining the unique challenges posed by agile project management and the role of SL in addressing them, this research provides insights into how SL can enhance team engagement, promote a collaborative environment, reduce burnout, and improve organizational outcomes. The findings emphasize the importance of leadership styles that prioritize sustainable practices, emotional intelligence, and collaboration in navigating the complexities of modern IT environments, which also contributes to reducing the phenomenon of turnover intention, a common issue in the tech industry.

Keywords: Burnout; Servant Leadership; Agile Methodology; Team Engagement; Literature Review.

1. Introduction

The advent of agile methodologies and the proliferation of startup culture intensified the demands on tech workers, prioritizing rapid development cycles and continuous delivery over more sustainable work practices (Hoda, Salleh and Grundy, 2018). Besides, agile projects result in a string of deadlines instead of a single deadline in predictive projects. (van Oorschot, Sengupta and Van Wassenhove, 2018). In this sense, agile project management is an essential aspect of software releases to the production environment as it unveils the success of the projects and key criteria of the project phases (Govindaras et al., 2023). However, in agile sprints, there are many negative consequences to the project where an unplanned allocation of resources can have implications for the projects (Govindaras et al., 2023). As such, any unplanned timeline to release a feature, miscommunication of the project

information, or late discoveries in the development phase causes burnout, budget overruns, and reassessment of launch dates (Govindaras et al., 2023).

In agile methodologies, bad management of release planning can cause burnout during a sprint where many tasks are carried out and go above the velocity of planned resources, which prevails stress and mental health problems for individual development team members (Kantola, Vanhanen and Tolvanen, 2022). This scenario becomes aggravated due to agile methods set out to accelerate processes and requirement needs, thus, engineers often have to decide between producing lower quality code or intensifying their individual stress ratio (Kuhlen and Speck, 2016).

The phenomenon of burnout in the Information Technology (IT) sector has garnered significant attention due to its pervasive impact on employees' health, productivity, and overall well-being (Moquin, Riemenschneider and Wakefield, 2019). IT has been shown to not only affect individual employees but also to have a detrimental impact on the organizations for which they work, leading to decreased productivity, higher turnover rates, and increased absenteeism (Ajayi and Udeh, 2024; Freeney and Tiernan, 2006). This can lead to employees choosing a different project or even looking out for various positions in other organizations, where a release planning practice must be in place to prevent these issues (Govindaras et al., 2023).

In response to the increasing prevalence of burnout among IT professionals, many organizations have begun to implement a variety of employee well-being initiatives aimed at mitigating these contributing factors (Moquin et al., 2019). Such initiatives range from flexible working arrangements and wellness programs to organizational culture changes aimed at promoting a healthier work-life balance and a more supportive work environment. (Moquin et al., 2019). Furthermore, the role of leadership within IT organizations cannot be understated in the context of combating burnout (Moquin et al., 2019; Salvagioni et al., 2017). Leaders play a crucial role in shaping the organizational culture, setting expectations, and modeling healthy work behaviors (Govindaras et al., 2023). Among the leadership styles, Servant Leadership (SL), characterized by its focus on people, holds particular potential for project contexts marked by complexity and uncertainty (Han and Zhang, 2024).

SL shows incremental validity compared to other leadership styles like authentic, ethical, and transformational leadership (Han and Zhang, 2024). In addition, SL has been linked to favorable outcomes, including intrinsic motivation (Xue et al., 2022), work engagement (Bao, Li and Zhao, 2018), and emotional intelligence (Han and Zhang, 2024; Miao et al., 2021). In this way, Lemoine, Hartnell and Leroy (2019) conducted research to

identify the effect of servant leadership on burnout. Servant leadership, according to Canavesi and Minelli (2022), is described as an emerging style of leadership where leaders focus on followers' personal growth and development, by treating them in an ethical way. Moreover, servant leadership supports employee empowerment, development, interpersonal acceptance, and courage (Huning and Frieder, 2020).

Extant literature indicates that servant leadership increases individual and team-level effectiveness (Hu and Liden, 2011). Likewise It generates organizational and leader trust (Joseph and Winston, 2005; Sendjaya and Pekerti, 2010), compassionate love (van Dierendonck and Patterson, 2015), and in-role performance and organizational commitment (Liden et al., 2008). Furthermore, servant leadership is imply in Public service motivation of subordinates, collaboration among employees, (Liu, Hu and Cheng, 2015), creativity and innovation (Yoshida et al., 2014). This kind of leadership also has a positive impact in employee engagement (Carter and Baghurst, 2014) and well-being, and reduction turnover intentions (Hunter et al., 2013).

Thus, servant leaders make employees feel like partners in the organization, by developing strong bonds with employees through their follower centric and authentic nature. Besides, servant leaders are able to increase employee voice (Chughtai, 2016) and reduce burnout (Rivkin, Diestel and Schmidt, 2014). In this sense, the present study seeks to identify how servant leadership can be used as a strategy to mitigate burnout in agile IT teams.

2. Theoretical Reference

2.1 Servant Leadership

Servant leadership can be defined as a multidimensional leadership theory that starts with a desire to serve (Barbuto Jr, Gottfredson and Searle, 2014; Greenleaf, 1998), followed by an intent to lead and develop others (Spears, 2010), to ultimately achieve a higher purpose objective to the benefit of individuals, organizations, and societies (Van Dierendonck, 2011). This concept was introduced by Robert Greenleaf, who defined servant leadership as a leadership style where the leader serves first, rather than leads (Liden et al., 2015). In this sense, servant leadership is a holistic leadership approach that engages followers in multiple dimensions (e.g., relational, ethical, emotional, spiritual), such that they are empowered to grow into what they are capable of becoming (Greenleaf, 1977).

A core characteristic of servant leaders is an ability to transcend their self-interest (van Dierendonck, 2011). Due to that, servant leadership may increase organizational performance because the personal commitment to subordinates/followers may in turn increase support of organizational goals (Winston, 2015; Fairholm, 1997; Farling et al., 1999). They are said to be

called to leadership not for personal power or prestige, but an innate desire to be of service to others as well as their organizations and communities (Reed, Vidaver-Cohen and Colwell, 2011). In addition, when employees are comfortable sharing their ideas or problems with a supervisor, they are more satisfied with the organization (Tymon, Stumpf and Doh, 2010).

The application of servant leadership principles creates increased job satisfaction and improves organizational productivity (Brewer, 2010). Additionally, the second objective of a servant leader might be to care and protect followers (Coetzer, Bussin and Geldenhuys, 2017). In this context, to care for followers might include creating an effective working climate by providing the necessary job resources to enhance work engagement that ultimately results in favorable individual and organizational outcomes (Coetzer et al., 2017).

Another objective of a servant leader can be to grow followers (Brewer, 2010). (Coetzer et al., 2017). Therefore, empowerment was defined by the results as developing others, transforming followers, transferring responsibility, sharing information, coaching, mentoring, and supporting followers individually, building self-confidence, wellbeing and proactive follower behavior, and helping followers to mature emotionally, intellectually, and ethically (Coetzer et al., 2017). All of these empowerment practices relate to growing and developing followers (Panaccio et al., 2015). Empowerment and building trustful relationships is interlinked in a way that without a trustful relationship (Coetzer et al., 2017). Empowerment not only focuses on vocational growth, but also emotional, intellectual, and ethical maturity (Coetzer et al., 2017; Sendjaya and Cooper, 2011) and aim to release individual potential (Coetzer et al., 2017; Ja'afaru Bambale, 2014). This is emphasized as one of the fundamental goals of servant leaders to make followers servant leaders themselves (Coetzer et al., 2017; Greenleaf, 1998).

2.2 Agile Methodology

The popularity of agile methods has strongly increased in recent years (Dingsøyr, Nerur, Balijepally and Moe, 2012). Agile becomes a philosophical framework for managing projects, emphasizing the importance of individuals and interactions, working solutions, and customer collaboration over rigid processes and tools (Koundinya et al., 2024). Regarding this, the use of agile methods and the resulting change of collaboration makes software development a teamwork, which demands new skills like team spirit or communication (Prommegger et al., 2019; Moe, Dingsøyr and Dybå, 2010; Whitworth and Biddle, 2007). Its short-cycled, iterative improvement model and incremental delivery mechanism enable developers to respond swiftly to evolving customer needs, ensuring quick, customer driven deliveries and bolstering satisfaction (Koundinya et al., 2024). Consequently, the work of IT

professionals will become more human-centric and socially oriented (Prommegger et al., 2019; Purna Sudhakar, Farooq and Patnaik, 2011).

However, agile practices (in software development) can be energizing and depleting at the same time (Benlian, 2022). It was stated that the pressure on teams that must deal with performing their activities with short deadlines often leads to burnout, developer departures, and other unanticipated results (Morandini et al., 2021). Moreover, this can cause fatigue and burnout much sooner than when compared to traditional software development methodologies, such as waterfall (Morandini et al., 2021; Pressman, 2005).

Agile development teams typically work in short cycles in which they deliver working software incrementally and iteratively and focus on emergently understanding the problem space during development (Benlian, 2022; Harris et al. 2009). Furthermore, as agile methods may help focus development solutions more quickly than other life cycle strategies, they represent an approach for managing software projects (Morandini et al., 2021). However, this approach, while fostering innovation and flexibility, also contributed to increasing work intensity, longer hours, and a blurring of the lines between personal and professional life, thereby exacerbating stress and burnout among tech employees (Ajayi and Udeh, 2024). In this scenario, servant leader acts as an effective leadership style in the context of project-based organizations characterized by complexity and uncertainty (Han and Zhang, 2024), because there is an important involvement of agile leadership in the motivation for innovation and improvements aimed at the agile organization, in the involvement of servant leadership, supporting teams for self-organization, and use of management techniques and agile practices (Neto et al., 2022).

2.3 Burnout

The rapid development of information technology (IT) industry has posed challenges for IT companies, seeking to recruit and retain professionals and talents (Lopez del Huerto, 2023; Erturk and Vurgan, 2015). Due to that, the demand for IT professionals is on the rise, while the supply declines, causing existing employees to experience work overload and burnout (Lopez del Huerto, 2023; Armstrong, Brooks and Riemenschneider 2015). Burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Moquin et al., 2019; Salvagioni et al., 2017), has been shown to not only affect individual employees but also to have a detrimental impact on the organizations for which they work, leading to decreased productivity, higher turnover rates, and increased absenteeism (Moquin et al., 2019; Freeney and Tiernan, 2006).

The recognition of burnout as a significant issue within the IT industry has led to a growing body of research aimed at identifying its causes, impacts, and potential interventions (Moquin et al., 2019). Studies have identified several key factors contributing to burnout in IT professionals, including workload, work-life imbalance, lack of job control, insufficient rewards, breakdown of community, and absence of fairness (Moquin et al., 2019; Leiter and Maslach, 2003). Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that goes beyond traditional wellness programs to include measures aimed at improving job design, organizational culture, and management practices (Moquin et al., 2019). From this scenario, servant leaders can develop employees who are more likely to share information between themselves (Tuan, 2016), are more proactive and adaptive (Bande et al., 2016), and have lower levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout (Rivkin et al., 2014). This approach not only empowers employees but also promotes engagement, job satisfaction, and resilience, key components of a healthy work environment (Moquin et al., 2019).

When managers express gratitude and respect for employees' efforts, production soars, employees are less inclined to experience burnout, and everyone benefits (Govindaras et al., 2023). Besides, servant leaders can develop employees who are more likely to share information between themselves (Luu, 2016), are more proactive and adaptive (Bande et al., 2016), and have lower levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout (Rivkin et al., 2014). Servant leaders also protect the wellbeing of followers by providing more job resources and by managing the job demands of followers to decrease burnout that causes ill health (Coetzer et al., 2017; De Beer, Rothmann and Pienaar, 2012). In this sense, the study of Eva et al., (2019) corroborate with the current study, stating that there may be a positive relationship between servant leadership behaviors displayed and the burnout, stress, and subsequent health outcomes felt by the leader (Panaccio et al., 2015).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a narrative literature review. Narrative literature reviews have been widely used to provide a comprehensive and holistic perspective on a given topic (Grech, 2021), integrating and interpreting findings from diverse studies, as well as for developing theoretical insights across multiple constructs, including leadership, burnout, and agile methodologies. In this context, the main objective is to explore and synthesize existing knowledge on the role of servant leadership as a strategy to mitigate burnout in agile IT teams.

3.2 Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search string was structured by combining the core concepts using Boolean operators to ensure both precision and adequate coverage. Specifically, the string applied was: “servant leadership” AND “burnout” AND (“agile methodology” OR “agile teams” OR “software development” OR “IT professionals”). This combination allowed for a focused retrieval of studies while still capturing relevant variations within the agile and IT context. The search was not limited by publication date, but it was focused on peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and relevant academic publications to ensure the credibility and academic rigor of the sources.

3.3 Selection Criteria

The selection of studies was guided by their relevance and alignment with the research objectives. To ensure consistency and rigor, the inclusion criteria were defined based on adaptations from Ferreira and De Souza (2023) and Farooq et al. (2022). The criteria were as follows: (1) studies written in English; (2) studies addressing servant leadership and its characteristics or outcomes; (3) studies discussing agile methodologies and team dynamics; (4) research related to burnout, particularly in organizational or IT contexts; (5) studies with full-text availability freely for download; and (6) studies published in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed through content analysis, following the approach proposed by Ajayi and Udeh (2024), enabling the systematic categorization and interpretation of findings from the selected studies. The selected studies were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This process involved identifying, comparing, and synthesizing recurring themes and patterns across the literature. Key themes included leadership behaviors, employee well-being, team engagement, collaboration, and burnout mitigation mechanisms.

Through this analysis, relationships between servant leadership practices and burnout reduction were conceptually mapped, allowing for the development of an integrated theoretical perspective. The findings were then organized to highlight how servant leadership contributes to improving team dynamics and reducing burnout in agile IT environments.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The impact of servant leadership as a mitigation strategy for burnout.

The establishment of an agile culture within organizations is strongly influenced by the adoption of servant leadership practices (Kim et al., 2020). However, implementing this leadership approach in self-organized and distributed teams presents significant challenges,

particularly due to reduced direct supervision and increased reliance on team autonomy (Neto et al., 2022; Parker, Holesgrove and Pathak, 2015; Srivastava and Jain, 2017). In this context, servant leadership has been shown to play a protective role, contributing to lower levels of burnout while enhancing work engagement and overall life satisfaction (Upadyaya et al., 2016).

In this way, Mergel (2016) and Shamim et al., (2016) highlight that in an environment of agile project management practices, the person in a leadership role, regardless of the framework, must ensure a collaborative environment, good relationship with the team, in addition to encouraging the ability of each one to act during the life cycle of the projects, thus giving rise to the term servant leadership. Additionally, The servant leader will seek out and use as many opportunities as they can find to listen to employees, they embody a deep respect for employees and demonstrate this by listening respectfully to opinions, ideas, feelings, and worries, all key issues for those experiencing burnout (Han and Zhang, 2024). Thus, The servant leader shares power, puts the needs of others first, and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible (Mahon, 2021).

In this sense, by modeling openness to feedback, reflection on failures, and striving for self-betterment, servant leaders demonstrate a group climate with continual learning and self-development (Han and Zhang, 2024). Servant leaders conceive of inclusion as a societal good requiring responsible management; they are more prone to value inclusion over exclusion, integration over assimilation, thus helping vulnerable group members to realize their potential, and contribute to the achievement of team objectives (Gotsis and Grimani, 2016). Besides that, servant leaders focus on stewardship and motivate teams to question old assumptions and seek new knowledge (Yoshida et al., 2014). As a result, Infusing Servant Leadership into the supervisory process may be one way to mitigate against some of the negative impacts associated with burnout (Mahon, 2021).

5. Conclusion

This paper presented the use of servant leadership as a burnout mitigation strategy in agile IT teams. Based on this conjecture, the following constructs were described: servant leadership, which can be characterized as a type of leadership aimed at serving first in order to lead later, seeking to engage and empower followers in relation to multiple dimensions (ethical, emotional, and relational, for example); agile methodology, described as a flexible process that prioritizes rapid development cycles; and burnout, as an emotional consequence of the wear and tear experienced by IT professionals due to the exhausting and increasingly challenging work routine. In this context, this narrative literature review aimed to examine the

relationships among these constructs in order to understand how servant leadership can contribute to agile methodology processes and help mitigate burnout among IT professionals. To achieve this, existing literature was analyzed with the purpose of identifying synergies and conceptual connections between the constructs.

As a result, the research showed that servant leadership has several actions that can reinforce the role of the employee within the organization, encouraging their empowerment, in order to guide, train, and support them in building their self-confidence and well-being. In addition, servant leadership can, from its position within the organization, promote the proactive behavior of its followers and help them to mature emotionally, intellectually, and ethically. This type of leadership, as also observed in the survey, encourages open dialog between leaders and followers, which can promote changes in the quality of life at work.

This study presents some limitations. Firstly, as a narrative literature review, the selection and interpretation of studies may be subject to researcher bias, given the absence of a fully systematic protocol. Second, the analysis relies exclusively on secondary data from existing literature, which limits the ability to empirically validate the proposed relationships between the analyzed constructs.

Future research may wish to empirically using primary data as they relate to servant leadership in general, and the role of the supervisor using a Servant Leadership Supervision Scale (SLSS) for reducing burnout and other negative stressful experiences in employees (Mahon, 2021). From this perspective, it will be evaluated, quantitatively, to assess the impact of servant leadership on the reduction of burnout and other stress experiences of workers.

Another future work could explore whether agile leadership contributes positively to the organization to remove organizational limitations and help in the delivery of project results in software development teams that use the Scrum Framework and the Method Kanban (Neto et al., 2022). In this sense, as reported in the authors' work, it will be investigated how the contribution of servant leadership influences the delivery of results by teams that use agile methodologies.

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Apêndice - “**USO DE IAG NESTA PESQUISA**”

1 - Foi utilizado o ChatGPT.

2 - Não foram realizados dados para treinamento.

3- O ChatGPT auxiliou no processo de geração de ideias, na ideação da pesquisa assim como na edição, formatação e escrita do trabalho, quando necessário a busca por termos sinônimos, sugestões de melhoria no texto e planejamento de escrita.